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DEMYSTIFYING THE TURMOIL OF CULTURAL IDENTITY AND
RACIAL POLITICS: A DIASPORIC STUDY OF ADICHIE'S
AMERICANAH

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ABSTRACT

The current study has taken into consideration Americanah, a famous diasporic novel written by Nigerian-American author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. This study attempts to vindicate the instances which caused the turmoil of identity in the character of Ifemelu, after she migrated from Nigeria to America, and leads her to a sense of guilt and inferiority complex. She faced a lot of trials and challenges to cope with her historical identity and construct a new identity to fit in American Society. When she is back in Nigeria, her friends describe her with the name "Americanah" to tease her Americanised way of behavior. This study has presented a detailed overview of racial politics and shows the struggle of Ifemelu with the stereotypes and discourses of race in America while fight with the myths of sexism and racism. The theoretical framework used for the analysis has been taken from Stuart Hall's Cultural Identity and Diaspora (1990) and Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic's Critical Race Theory (2017).

INTRODUCTION

The dynamics of multiculturalism are broadening their roots in the 21st century because of the migration of people across borders. Consequently, the topics of identity, race, migration, and trans-culturalism are at the peak of literary and political debates. *Americanah* is a famous Diasporic novel written by Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, published in 2013, about her racial struggles, identity quest, and immigrant experiences in the United States of America.

The protagonist of the novel Ifemelu, a female character moves to America in pursuit of her higher education. She faced many problems there like identity crisis, racism, marginalization, discrimination, and issues of gender. All these issues arise as a result of migration to such a country (USA), where there is no check and balance for such kind of issues. By analyzing this text from the perspective of diaspora theory, Edward Said very wisely said that "Exile is a punishment" (Ashcroft, 2005, p.439).

It is very right that the expatriate experiences are very painful in the host country and it develops a sense of loss in their minds for their own native culture and consequently leads to identity crisis. In *Americanah* we can easily see that Adichie has highlighted many African traditions and norms which are in conflict with the American culture and caused a kind of split in the mind of Ifemelu. The quest for identity in *Americanah* is continuous i.e., Ifemelu is struggling with her African identity as well as constructing American identity. Stuart Hall very beautifully said that "It continues to be a very powerful and creative force in emergent forms of representation amongst hitherto marginalized people" (Ashcroft, 2004, p.437).

Ifemelu is continuously struggling with her African identity and she wants to be recognized and respected like the white Americans. As a minority and being othered by the white people she adopted a kind of self-depreciative attitude which resulted in an inferiority complex in her identity. "Why do you say Africa instead of just saying the country you mean?" (Adichie, p.12). We cannot speak with liberty, until and unless we claim a strong identity in this modern global village nowadays a very hot subject of discussion among critics and scholars. The articulation of racial politics is a major theme of almost all African writers and there is a continuous struggle to deconstruct the notion of race and reinterpretation it as a stigma in the ethics of humanity. *Americanah* has opened a wide range of discussions in the spheres of African-American racial politics and situates them in the larger context of race and ethnicity.

This paper has delved into the concept of identity from the perspective of black people and spotlighted the tension between bicultural identities in the chosen novel. It will focus on different factors of identities like nationality, race, gender, and culture. Furthermore, this paper will examine the immigrant experiences of the protagonist Ifemelu and the discriminations she faced as a black woman in the novel *Americanah*.

The Problem Statement

A person with black or grey color of skin has no equal rights in America to pursue his/her American dream and is only limited to the white color of skin. This manipulation and maneuvering of the white people make race and identity questionable. Most black people find it difficult to survive as a representative of a minority group in America which has created the issues of identity crisis and racism. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu started a feeling of disgust because of her black color and African Identity. She came from a culture where the traditions and norms are quite opposite to the new culture which she adopted and her experience is like a life of struggle and hardship. She imitated the lifestyle of Americans to fit there and pursue her goal but it didn't work for her. The feeling of foreignness, blackness and gender-based discrimination inculcated a split in her identity. She understands that she cannot escape her African identity and feels ashamed of that. Adichie highlighted Ifemelu's traumatic experiences of racial discrimination, marginalization, nostalgia, and alienation in the novel *Americanah*. Although, much research has been conducted on the issues of race and identity. Little is known about the roots of these two problems that why it is very common with the African people, especially in America. In America, the turmoil of identity and racial politics has disturbed the life of thousands of people and this is a serious issue which needs to be addressed by the scholars.

The Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to explore the racial discrimination and identity crisis faced by migrants in America. This paper has analyzed the character of Ifemelu in the novel *Americanah*, from a different perspective like her experiences in Nigeria, her immigrant experiences in America, and the conflicts between two cultures. This study has drawn attention toward the fact that how discrimination of race and gender shaped the identities of individual and highlights the struggle and hardships one face in a foreign country. This study intends to research how the problem of racism and identity destroys the social structure of modern capitals and resulted in violence.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research paper attempts to answer the following research questions.

Research Question 1:

In what ways does *Americanah* illustrate racial discrimination and white privileges from the perspective of Critical Race Theory?

Research Question 2:

How does Ifemelu measure her African identity as an immigrant and compare it with the dominant culture of America?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it draws attention to the problems of racism and identity faced by immigrants in foreign countries, mostly in America. Americanah has illustrated the question of racism, cultural identity, and hardship faced by African people in America. This study is significant because it connects the gap between the native cultures of Ifemelu and the host culture in America. It suggests the idea of migrant adaptation of host culture and avoiding discriminations and prejudices to cope with issues of identity crisis and inferiority complex. Furthermore, this study also spotlighted the dangers faced by African identity and African culture in a country like America.

Delimitation of the Study

The study is delimited to only one literary text i.e. Adichie's Americanah. The theoretical framework used for the analysis has been taken from Stuart Hall's Cultural Identity and Diaspora (1990) and Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic's Critical Race Theory (2017).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review of the study contains two parts. The first part contains reviews of major critics on the works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and specifically on the novel Americanah, while the second part is the theoretical perspective which consists of the emergence and salient features of Critical Race Theory and Cultural identity.

Jasmine Back (2016) authored a project about the construction of postcolonial identities and immigrant experiences in the novel Americanah. According to her, one only becomes black outside of Africa. The race is therefore an important factor in her identity construction. She highlighted the discrimination faced by African people in America through a postcolonial lens. She further discussed the reason for racial dominance that badly shapes the identity and behavior of African in America. She used John Iceland's models of immigrant adaptation and explained immigrant experiences concerning the dominant social structure.

Chinenye Amonyeze (2017) authored an article and focused on liminality and bicultural identity in Americanah. She analyzed Americanah as a fiction of reputation management, renegotiates image rights of immigrants and minorities on a humanistic template engendering a social compact of respect and mutual understanding

Eleanor Anneh Dasi (2019) authored an article and highlighted the issues of identity, race, and beauty from a postcolonial perspective in Americanah. The relation between race, culture, and slavery has been relationships of these issues concerning migration and trans-culturalism and draws attention towards the colonizer's evil acts by destroying the African identity. Janice Sandra

David (2019) authored an article specifically on the migration experience of Nigerians in America and further explores the negotiation of cultural identity in Americanah. The author analyzed the identity of many characters and shows the impact of stereotyping on society. This article has focused on the negative attitude of identity and tried to reform the historical identity of African people. There is also some exploration of the Diasporic experiences of the nation highlighted mostly in African literature and also highlighted several socio-political issues of the Diasporic people in America. The researcher has focused on conflicts of culture as well.

From a theoretical perspective, there is abundant literature available as well. In this study, I have combined two theories i.e., Cultural Identity and Critical Race Theory for the theoretical framework of research. Harry Levin (1973) researched the title *Literature and Cultural Identity* and contextualized identity and culture in the frame of literature. The traditional American concept of the melting pot has been called into question, and the concept of ethnicity and Negritude has been deconstructed in this study.

Almas Aprilia Damayanti, in research article, *Cultural Identity in Jean Kwok's Novel Searching for Sylvie Lee* (2020), has investigated about cultural identity on the life of immigrant Chinese in America. Some of the prominent characters in the selected text are going through cultural dislocation in the United States and are deeply upset about their last land which they have left long time ago. The protagonist of this novel is almost similar to Ifemelu, the protagonist of my selected novel, *Americanah*.

In his research paper, Damayanti has used qualitative method of research. The primary focus is on the dialogues of the characters and second focus is on cultural diaspora, cultural identity and cultural dislocation. In the analysis, the author zoomed out the problems and complexities of cultural diaspora and identity. The important thing about this research which is related to my research is the analysis of the identity from different perspectives. There is the original representation of culture and language and highlighting the deep connections which shape the personality of human beings.

The protagonist of the selected text is reflecting different features from her native culture in China and there are also some elements which she shows from the host culture while living as an immigrant in the United States of America. The American culture has been portrayed as adoptable and easy going culture throughout the world. The main character has gathered some good memories about her native culture but as an immigrant she does not care about her identity and consider herself as some sort of floating object without any anchorage. The research is closely related to my project because it focused on diasporic experience of a female in America same as Ifemelu's character when started her life as an immigrant in America.

Lorenzo Bowman (2009) authored an article that focused on the traumatic experiences faced as a result of racism. A lot of research work has been done on this novel but very little is known about the cultural identity and racial politics from the perspective of the diaspora which creates a gap for this study.

Bowman has focused on the racial discrimination and an environment for the Critical Race Theory (CRT). The main focus of this article is to explore the theoretical implications of CRT and shows us that in the life of immigrant it is of utmost importance by considering it as a basic element in American life. CRT takes into consideration the political, social and economic domains which are the fundamental causes of racial injustices and discrimination. Those people who suffered racial distinction just for the color of their skin are traumatized and fell a prey to inferiority complex. In this context of this theory, it is silly and preposterous to believe to consider a human being dominant on behalf of the color of skin and reveals us the racist actions which are serving as a challenge to immigrant life throughout the world.

The author has delved his research on the character of some characters in which they share their practical life experiences by describing life span while staying in America. These stories are not just stories for reading but rather it gives us a deep message that this issue of racial distinction is very serious and explore the experiences behind the discourse of American dream. In other words the rise of racism is somehow proving American dream as some sort of illusion which is a subtle ironic remark on the overt racism by the white supermajority in America. This research is closely related to my research as it is focusing on racism from the perspective of CRT but creating a gap for me to avoid the cultural and diasporic element.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This research is reflexive in nature and qualitative in approach which is based on textual analysis of Adichie's *Americanah* (2013). As qualitative research is based on personal interpretations of the researcher the same has been used by the scholar as well and also mentioned the opinions, ideas, and researches of other scholars for adding value to the conclusion of the study.

The theoretical framework which has been used for this study is taken from Stuart Hall's *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1990) and Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic's *Critical Race Theory* (2017). For highlighting racial politics in *Americanah*, *Critical Race Theory* (1995) by Delgado and Stefancic is used. The critical race theory (CRT) movement is a collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship between race, racism, and power.

Critical Race Theory is a firm standpoint against the racist ideology in the world and especially in United States of America. This theory basically highlights the cultural battles between the host and native cultures of immigrant around the globe. It vindicates the shame of racism and are concerned with the institutions that promote these colorblind propagandas. This theory is a strong step towards the reformation process and questions the racist structures in the social, political and economic sphere of life. This is not a type of worldview that stands alone but rather it's a paradigm which has been accepted by a huge sum of people for analysing the tactics of racism.

CRT is openly challenging those existing norms and traditions which are in itself a paragon of racism consciously or unconsciously. This is considered to be an integral part of civil rights movement but mostly focuses on historical and economic domains. The underpinning of this theory has been used as a stimulant for the intellectual of different ages to stop racism and racial discrimination in all spheres of life. The basic tenets of CRT is usually applicable to American society which is used as cultural construct to promote racial progress and suppressed minorities. CRT has also been used to regulate hate speeches and for character assassination of a person on the basis of color, creed, religion or nationality.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The Africans have been brainwashed into thinking that their cultures and nature are not worth exposing to the world. This poses serious problems of individual and collective cultural identities as the Africans in the diaspora cannot speak for themselves from the perspective of their socio-cultural realities but tend to measure themselves and their worth using western or colonizing yardsticks. In the novel *Americanah*, Ifemelu faced several times issues of identity and was perplexed by her black color and origin as an African.

The Turmoil of Cultural Identity in Adichie's Americanah

The classical debate of diaspora mostly revolves around cultural identity and which reasserts the conflicts between the native culture and host culture. Adichie in *Americanah* addresses this issue of bicultural conflicts several times and suggests to black people for the creation of their individual and cultural identities. Ifemelu as a black woman was feeling very conscious about her color and origin. She questions the traditions of America and started to deconstruct the dominant notion of their culture. At the very start of the novel, Ifemelu felt segregated and alienated as a woman, black and immigrant in the United States but slowly and gradually she activated her coping mechanism to develop her own identity and amazed by the stereotyping of African people on the hands of white that gives a deep sense of negativity in her immigrant experiences. She encountered all those prejudices and discriminatory attributes just because her African culture was inferior to American culture.

The identity crisis faced by Ifemelu largely affected her self-esteem as a black woman but she does not give up and tries to understand the politics of identity and controlled it by social exploration. "She liked, most of all, that in this place of affluent ease, she could pretend to be someone else, someone specially admitted into a hallowed American club, someone adorned with certainty" (Adichie, p.7). It is very common in the immigrant experience that she starts to imitate the confidence and shows to people that she is not foreign but her internal conflict is inevitable which she cannot handle.

She scoured Nigerian websites, Nigerian profiles on Facebook, Nigerian blogs, and each click brought yet another story of a young person who had recently moved back home, clothed in American or British degrees, to start an investment company, a music production business, a fashion label, a magazine, a fast-food franchise. (Adichie, p.8)

The identity of the African diaspora is greatly shaped by America which is constituted through different means of traditions, thoughts, politics, and other expressive cultures. Ifemelu was also one of the characters who started pursuing her American Dream but in my point of view, she was not influenced by American culture because she does not stay there forever and returns to Nigeria. She is still considering herself as a part of Africa and does not want to renounce her African identity at any cost. "A Peculiar Case of a Non-American Black, or How the Pressures of Immigrant Life Can Make You Act Crazy" (Adichie, p.14)

Identity is a social construction and according to Stuart Hall there are two types of identities, the first one is 'collective identity which is like a shared historical ethnicity, while the second one is unstable and fluid one which results from the individual experience. As the identity of Ifemelu is "It continues to be a very powerful and creative force in emergent forms of representation amongst hitherto marginalized peoples" (Hall, p.2). The sense of guilt and disgust created by her collective identity was just because of the dynamics of power politics which shaped the identity of African people as inferior and uncivilized. This notion can be applied to the collective identity of belonging to an African diaspora, for instance, African Americans share a background of slavery or the migrant conflicts of recent immigrants. "Why do you say Africa instead of just saying the country you mean?" Ifemelu asked (Adichie, p.12).

Julius and Ifemelu belong to the latter category of immigrants. "It is only from this second position that we can properly understand the traumatic character of the colonial experience" (Hall, p.4). The collective history of black Africans is full of traumatic memories of slavery since colonial times but still, those legacies and colonial attributes haunt them in this modern times. Nonetheless, white masters can rightly be blamed for these disasters of identity crisis not only in African people but all across the world. "To earn the prize of being taken seriously among Nigerians in America, among Africans in America, indeed among immigrants in America, she needed more years. Six years, she began to say when it was just three and a half" (Adichie, p.13). This statement shows the struggle of Ifemelu gain recognition in America by winning a prize. It is a very a pathetic situation in which a person must be famous so he or she will feel secure otherwise things will go wrong every time. The focus is on the life of immigrants who live a poor life with low worth of self importance and with an unrecognized identity.

As Ifemelu experiences depict the American attitude of ignorance towards African in every aspect of life just because they have been taught since childhood that black is inferior "Sometimes making fragile links to race. Sometimes not believing herself" (Adichie, p.7). According to Americans Africa is morally degraded and shaped the behavior and attitude of Africans in a negative direction. The above statement asserts that the color of person in America matters a lot and sometimes it can become a moment of shame for you if the color of your skin is dark. Ifemelu was confused that whether she can stay African or she must reconounce her American identity.

Racial Politics in Adichie's Americanah

Adichie's *Americanah* shows a continuous struggle of identity and race in several characters and reflects those instances of racial discrimination and racial prejudices which resulted in the trauma of race. These racial problems are still very much prevalent even in today's America, and haunt Africans who migrate to live the American dream "Race is overhyped these days, black people need to get over themselves, it's all about class now, the haves and the have-nots," (Adichie, p.7). As Ifemelu was also an immigrant black woman so her analyses and experiences of racial trauma are more than any other person in the novel. Adichie wants to portray these painful experiences from the perspective of a woman because women are more vulnerable and sensitive than men. "Everyday racism is a common, ordinary experience for people of color in the United States" (Delgado and Stefancic, CRT). Since skin color, hair texture, and bodily features of blacks are interpreted as a statement of inferiority and ugliness and are even used to judge moral, intellectual capabilities, and professionalism. These women are often pressured to fashion their appearances closer to the dominant beauty ideals they come in contact with.

"The only race that matters is the human race." But he said, "Ever write about adoption? Nobody wants black babies in this country, and I don't mean biracial, I mean black. Even the black families don't want them." (Adichie, p.7).

Adichie is not trying to draw a totalizing view of racism in America and she appreciates some white people in the novel because of their unbiased behavior. At the same time, she also draws attention to those black people who are themselves racist and damaging the "experiences of racial minorities have given them and destroying what might be called a unique voice of color" (Delgado and Stefancic, CRT). I add to these discussions, how racial constructions and social expectations affect the migrant African female's sense of self, and how she struggles to overcome these stereotypes in the American society and this is of course a painful and traumatic experience for the immigrants in the United States.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it is very common in America for immigrants to face issues of identity, race, alienation, marginalization, and other evil acts of prejudice. Ifemelu faced a lot of challenges in her immigrant life and lost the very sense of her identity in the turmoil of crisis. Her painful experiences lead her to such a stage in which she is not attributing herself to any cultural or social identity and eventually fails to live in either way American or Nigerian. The above analysis make it clear that Ifemelu was ashamed of her African identity because it was her only reason that make her shameful for the color of her skin. The suffering she faced as an African immigrant in American society traumatized her by causing some indispensable wounds to her identity. Furthermore, racism has aggravated her situation and creates a sense of guilt and inferiority complex in her mind. In short, due to migration, she lost everything such as identity, sense of self, cultural value, etc. which is very common with all diasporas. *Americanah* shows us different aspects in which the African diaspora suffered from racism and their continuous quest for identity lead them nowhere.

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